

# 5 In my view: Is the aid sector racist?

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Is the aid sector racist? I had been reflecting on this question for a number of years. However, after the House of Commons' International Development Committee, which I chair, launched an inquiry into sexual abuse in the aid sector and we kept hearing that aid workers and recipients were also subjected to racial abuse, we felt a responsibility to act. In March 2021, we opened a new inquiry to understand the nature and prevalence of racism within the sector and to explore how the sector could be more inclusive.

The evidence we heard reaffirmed that the structure of the aid sector is beset by a fundamental power imbalance. Too often, decisions about funding and policy are taken in the offices of large, white-led organisations in the Global North though most aid programmes are delivered in low-income countries in the Global South. We heard that these power structures are remnants of colonialism; the same paternalistic ideas underpin the common portrayal of affected populations as being in need of "saving".

The prevalent idea that higher income countries are both best placed to assist people in lower income countries and less likely to mismanage financial resources can only be seen as grounded in racism, not fact. Local organisations are often branded "high risk" despite evidence suggesting that having international non-governmental organisations acting as intermediaries between donors and local organisations does not represent value for money. This approach denies local communities a voice in decisions that affect them, which has led to inappropriate funding decisions and forced dependency rather than sustainable empowerment.

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A clear example of this is the UK government's decision to decrease aid spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income. During our inquiry we heard how these cuts were taken with virtually no consultation with implementing partners or the affected communities. One witness told us that because of these cuts, programmes that provided contraception to local communities were forced to close, denying women the power to take decisions about their health and fertility, and with no apparent concern about the longer term consequences.

To address this imbalance, resources and decision-making power must be transferred to local communities. Decisions about aid spending cannot be isolated from the people who will be affected by them. That is not only a matter of principle. Programmes that are detached from the communities they serve are also less likely to be effective. In our Racism in the Aid Sector report<sup>1</sup> published in June 2022, the committee calls on the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to shift the balance of power by increasing the amount of funding that goes to locally led civil society organisations

and to address the barriers to securing funding that these organisations face, such as the requirement that funding applications must be submitted in English.

Discrimination towards black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) staff working in the aid sector is rife. A survey of aid workers that was submitted as evidence to our inquiry found that half of responders who identified as belonging to a racial or ethnic minority had experienced racism at work in the past year. The boards and senior leadership positions of non-governmental organisations are mostly white, with women of colour particularly underrepresented in senior roles, while most frontline delivery roles are held by BIPOC staff. The ethnicity pay gap – that is, the difference in pay between white and BIPOC staff – also remains a problem. In our report, we recommended that aid organisations with more than 50 employees should be required to publish data on their ethnicity pay gaps. Without clear and comprehensive data to illustrate the scale of the problem, we cannot begin to tackle it.

The evidence we heard suggests that some in the aid sector are not only unable but also unwilling to confront the reality of racism. We heard from the executive director of one non-governmental organisation based in East Africa who told us that her organisation had been “blacklisted” by donors after she had spoken out about her experiences of racism in the sector. There is no doubt that most aid workers have good intentions, but we can respect the excellent work they do while also acknowledging that racism persists in the culture and structure of the sector.

Our inquiry has forced us to confront our perceptions of the sector and our own working practices, including the language that we use to describe the people who access aid.

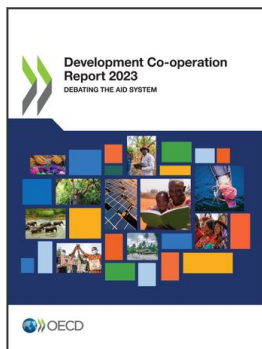
Our inquiry has forced us to confront our perceptions of the sector and our own working practices, including the language that we use to describe the people who access aid. Practical steps towards welcoming a diversity of approaches, listening to affected communities and promoting local staff to leadership positions will help. But only by confronting the underlying uncomfortable truths can we take the first steps towards dismantling racist power structures.

Is the aid sector racist? I will let you make up your own mind.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The report is available here:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22698/documents/166821/default>



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